COSMOPOLITAN CHRONICLE

True tales from the annals of history, archaeology, construction, and restoration of the Casa de Bandini and Cosmopolitan Hotel.
Old Town San Diego State Historic Park

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The Hole
Part II

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Early the next morning I was back at the Cosmopolitan Hotel to finish patching the hole in the end wall. I needed six adobe bricks of comparable size to the historic brick: one for the bottom course, two for the next course, and three for the top course.

I needed six bricks of comparable size to the historic brick to fill the hole: one for the bottom course, two for the next course, and three for the top course. Sean Shiraishi, a park interpreter, who has been making adobe bricks across the street from the Cosmo, literally saved the day. He graciously gave me six, sun-dried bricks, and loaned me a shovel and wheelbarrow to mix mud.

Each brick weighed about forty pounds. I hoisted one at a time on my shoulder and lugged each of them up the stairs. Next, I broke up some old damaged bricks in the Seeley yard, strained to remove pebbles and small rocks, added some sand and water, and mixed it into a mud-like paste for my mortar.

My next task was to cut each brick to its proper dimensions, working from the lowest course up. Bricks are scored or cut to size with a handsaw about a ½ inch deep; then the saw mark is gently tapped with a chisel and rock hammer to cut the block.

This was not difficult except for the bottom course. Since I had already mortared it with mud to set the new block, I had to kneel down on the joist, lean over the hole, and extend my arms while holding the brick and set it in place. I finally did it after the third try. That night my back ached even after a long soak in the bathtub.

The filled hole was about a half-foot lower than the existing wall. I used the remainder of the Bandini block to fill the hole and then plastered it over with mud. The only thing that remained to be done was to fill and patch the surface block on the exterior, which could be done later from a scaffold.

People often ask me what is my obsession with adobe? Why do I do it? After all, I am the district historian, not a mason. One of my principal responsibilities is to review proposed treatments of and alterations to historic buildings. Bill Mennell, an expert craftsmen and my supervisor, once told me that historians—if they want to be truly effective—need to understand historic building materials, methods of construction, and use of tools. He is a strong advocate of hands-on-learning.

Over the course of several years, I have begun to understand the importance of proper site drainage and grading, the causes of horizontal and vertical cracking, and the latest technologies and methods to stabilize or seismically reinforce earthen structures.

But what truly amazes me about 19th-century building materials like adobe, brick and lime plaster are their ecological and chemical properties. Unlike modern building materials, they are porous and permeable, derived from the land, and can always be recycled or reused. What we make from them are our tangible connections to an older, more natural world.